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Why planes could still vanish into thin air like MH370

The disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 prompted a slew of safety proposals meant to prevent another jetliner from inexplicably vanishing. Yet four years later, that possibility remains.

That's because international requirements for new planes to broadcast their locations every minute when they're in trouble don't take effect until January 2021. The disappearance of Flight 370 remains the biggest mystery in modern aviation, and the search to find it is the world's longest hunt for any jet. Last month, a new crew resumed scouring the Indian Ocean.

In an era where people can track their iPhones and Samsung Galaxy devices in real time, the world's most-advanced transportation industry still isn't obligated to do the same for craft carrying about 4 billion passengers a year. And that one-minute rule doesn't apply to the current fleet of 23,500 passenger planes and the thousands more joining them in the next three years — mostly in Asia.

"You can't say MH370 won't ever happen again, because it will," said David Stupples, a professor of electronic and radio systems at City, University of London. "Until 2040 or 2050, there's going to be a large number of aircraft flying around that don't have that tracking system fitted."

A gradual tightening starts in November, when airlines must track planes every 15 minutes under regulations adopted by the United Nations' International Civil Aviation Organiza-

tion. Some carriers already meeting this requirement are Malaysia Airlines, Singapore Airlines Ltd., Qantas Airways Ltd. and Qatar Airways.

Still, a jet cruising at 500 knots (575 miles) an hour that disappears between 15-minute pings creates a potential search zone of about 170,000 square kilometers (65,637 square miles). That's equivalent to the size of Florida.

There would be little chance of finding survivors in time, especially in the open ocean, and the sunken wreckage might escape detection for years, said Geoffrey Dell, a safety scientist at Central Queensland University in Australia who's been an air-safety investigator since 1979.

By comparison, the search zone for a plane that crashed between one-minute pings would be about 748 square kilometers — an area 227 times smaller.

"The industry takes strategic steps to ensure safety but moves very deliberately," Tom Schmutz, chief executive officer of Flyht Aerospace Solutions Ltd., said in an email. "Operators have typically pushed back on change because it can conflict with operational profits."

Calgary-based Flyht sells off-the-shelf technology that tracks planes by satellite. Its Automated Flight Information Reporting System is about the size of a briefcase, costs less than \$60,000 and can pinpoint a plane's airborne location every 20 seconds. (Bloomberg)